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Anthropology and Infrastructures: From the State to the Commons

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Inaugural Professorial Lecture

Chair in Social Anthropology

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Today my lecture will be about something that remains a relatively unusual theme for a social scientist: material infrastructures. Nevertheless, it is precisely now that the outbreak of the global financial crisis raises urgent questions about the future of the relationship between the state and society as we know them in contemporary Europe. And, by extension, it raises questions about both hard and soft infrastructures. The most recent chapter in this changing relationship between state and society is the so-called refugee crisis, where we see the world's richest continent — the place that claims to host the most modern and supposedly advanced polities — not being particularly eager to respond in a humane manner to the arrival of just a couple of million refugees. To return to the matter, infrastructures are the favoured domain for the materialisation of the relationship between people (citizens and non-citizens alike) with otherwise abstract state and supra-state authorities. It is this relationship that I have been studying ethnographically and theoretically since 2004, and in the following 40-

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45 minutes I wish to address a few of its dimensions.

‘We are the Infrastructure’

‘We are the infrastructure; the state and capital failed,’ one of my informants — a man in his 60s who has been involved in the movement for guerrilla urban gardening in the city’s southern suburbs (Elliniko-Argyroupoli district) — told me during my last major period of ethnographic fieldwork in Athens (from December 2012 till September 2014). This movement has succeeded in occupying parts of a former U.S. Air Force Base and transforming it into a common allotment planted with vegetables and herbs. But participants are also actively involved in the appropriation of the old Athens airport next to the American base.

In the early 2000s, Athens saw the construction of a new airport under a public/private partnership that allegedly favoured the private part (the German construction giant Hochtief). Soon the facilities of the old airport were privatised, and even though its premises constitute one of the largest plots of land on the Mediterranean seafront in a European capital city, it was recently sold for a mere fraction of its real value — very recently, in fact, as the agreement between the new owner, Lamda Development, and the Greek authorities was only signed on 6 June 2016. However, any potential investor will have to remove the people who use the area every day for their walks, cycling and other sport activities. They will have to deal with the 2,000 olive trees planted there as an act of guerrilla urban agriculture, but also the self-organised social solidarity clinic and other similar facilities that are housed in the old airport’s premises and that aim to benefit the local community. Although they clearly have the characteristics of a radical social movement, the various initiatives located in the old airport attract an enormous diversity of people, rather than the usual suspects of the activist community.

The result of that social and political confluence is that the protest against the privatisation of the airport, and state-owned assets more generally, evolved into an elaborate demand for the creation of a self-organised metropolitan park, with small-scale and inexpensive changes to the landscape and common use of the territory — more or less in accordance with a model inspired by the de-

growth movement, applied here in the form of the self-organised planting of olive trees between airport runways. Meanwhile, within this diverse context, some of those involved often draw interchangeably on the terms of 'public benefit/good' (demosio kalo/agatho, δημόσιο καλό/αγαθό) and 'common benefit/good' (koino kalo/agatho, κοινό καλό/αγαθό) when referring to their activities. But what potentially looks like a confusion between the terms 'public' and 'common' is not really that. This interchangeable use of terms is a result of an explicit shift from notions of the public (which is even gaining negative connotations in Greece today) towards the notions of the commons.

Soft and Hard Infrastructures

This shift does not only apply to the European country most affected by the financial crisis, but extends all across the continent. Since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, European countries have continued to face challenges to their budgets in education, childcare, public health, welfare and even emergency services. In the Netherlands, this is reflected in statements about a shift from the welfare state to a “participation society”, whereas in Britain the concept of the “big society” has been put forward as a new paradigm for the delivery of public services. At the same time, in the European countries most affected by the crisis — Greece and Portugal — ministries of social solidarity have recently been recently created, aiming to aid or co-opt grassroots activities that have been developed in areas where the market or the state have traditionally operated, but do not do so anymore. Indeed the trend is not limited in Europe; we are seeing similar self-organised initiatives in other parts of the Western world. ‘Occupy Sandy’, for instance, a grassroots welfare apparatus that emerged out of the Occupy Wall Street movement, proved to be the most effective emergency response mechanism when the U.S. East Coast was hit by hurricane Sandy.

Although challenges to so-called soft infrastructures (welfare state provisions and services) are most evident in citizens’ everyday lives, similar challenges to hard infrastructure (roads, energy, water and garbage management systems) are also reflected in state budgets due to the austerity

measures that have been taken (see Resosudarmo 2005:37). Between 2006 and 2013 alone, the activities of European infrastructure companies have been decreased by one-fourth within and outside the continent (Linklatters 2014). The International Energy Agency has warned that, unless there are investment in energy infrastructure, the EU's energy security will be under threat (IEA 2014). Similarly, articles in the press (Auters 2015) use the term 'infrastructural gap' to account for the 40% investment shortfall in infrastructure development in G20 countries. The World Economic Forum reached similar conclusions. In 2015, the European Commission responded to these challenges with a new strategic investment plan that prioritizes infrastructures; however, it was made clear that the EU is unable to fully finance it and needs private sector contributions (EC 2015). But the market does not seem eager to get involved: the EU was labelled as an unattractive destination for private investment in infrastructure in the latest Global Infrastructure Investment Index, while an EU member country (Greece) currently lies at the bottom of the Index (ARCADIS 2014).

As an anthropologist who has carried out extensive ethnographic research on infrastructures in both Eastern and Western Europe, I should add here that these public/private partnerships in the construction of infrastructure became the norm during the 1990s. Arguably, one of the main reasons such public-private partnerships became popular during the 1990s has to do with the collapse of Communism in Europe. The political antagonism between the two systems was a reason for the Western polities to provide as much as possible to their citizens — in terms of social policy, infrastructures or other provisions, quite often through state monopolies (in higher education, for instance). At the same time, the other side of the iron curtain had developed quite an infrastructural fetishism, both theoretically but also practically, resulting in a situation where both systems were explicitly competing for the consent of their citizens via their superiority as providers of services and infrastructures. Indeed, after the collapse of socialism and the new *modus operandi* of the Eastern European world — neoliberal reforms, strict austerity in social policy and the limitation of state provisions — it was only matter of time for the market to become a big player in

the Western European infrastructural realm.

We should add here that it is quite common for the private partner to benefit from the public/private agreements, as the representatives of the public sector (politicians) claimed a lack of expertise or knowhow and proposed the technocratic knowledge of the private sector as the key to a more effective, financially and technologically sustainable form of infrastructural development. The technocratic consultants employed to give such advice often represent the interests of the private sector, or even of specific corporations. Thus the margins for profit were large and flexible. Moreover, this probably explains why so many infrastructural projects that were perfectly functional were demolished and rebuilt from scratch all over Europe, especially in the East of the continent, but certainly not only there. The 1990s witnessed the start of what Pierre Bourdieu had called 'the utopia of unlimited growth'; or growth of the built environment for its own sake and the sake of the private sector, as some other critical voices argued. Nevertheless, now that the European public sector needs a hand, after sponsoring private infrastructural interests for two decades, the celebrated 'invisible hand of the market' is just too invisible.

Infrastructures Beyond Materiality

In the social sciences, soft and hard infrastructures are considered central to the way in which society perceives and experiences otherwise abstract state authorities in daily life (Dalakoglou & Kallianos 2014; Dalakoglou 2009; 2016; Larkin 2013; Humphrey 2006; Graham 2005). Infrastructures shape and stabilise the conditions of modernity (Edwards 2003:186). In this sense, infrastructures are embedded in the social processes of order and control that organizes the social fabric (Humphrey 2006). Hence, by extension, the ongoing crisis and the paradigmatic shift in the ways that infrastructures are governed and function affects the social contract between citizens and the state. This, in turn, raises questions about democracy and other modern principles and values that shaped Europe after World War II (Habermas 2012; Balibar 2010; Zizek 2015).

As the terminology used by Europe's political leadership makes clear, this phenomenon requires a fundamental transformation of the very essence of society, which is expected to become 'big' and more 'participatory'. This, indeed, is a huge shift, which represents a political emergency — remember that the governing party in Britain, the vanguard of neoliberalism in Europe, only recently claimed that 'there is no such thing as society', while it is now desperately looking for even more society to rescue the world. The Greek and Portuguese examples show that there are explicit political efforts to affect and transform what in classical social theory (Durkheim 1893) is considered to be the determinant factor of social organisation: solidarity. Words generally forgotten by European governments for years, words that until recently belonged mostly to marginalised social movements — such as 'solidarity', society and the commons — are actively mobilised by official governmental agents under the current state of exception. Certainly, they seem to be embedded within the context of austerity and crisis; it is these exceptional circumstances, 'the worst and longest capitalist crisis we have seen in recent history,' that force governments to ask help from society. This development is of course embedded within the idea that less state is synonymous to less social policy — yet there does not seem to be any less state when it comes to bailing out the financial sector from its speculative misadventures.

However, what seems to be understood and orchestrated as a top-down process is, in fact something that people in various places have already grasped since the beginning of the crisis — and they act upon it. The current conditions seem to demand a qualitatively new kind of society. What is at stake is a radical transformation of social relationships and the mechanisms through which society produces its material and social conditions and reproduces itself. The new social subjects must learn to act and think of both their individual and collective selves and their relationships with each other, as well as with the state and its infrastructures in novel ways. The recent example of the refugee crisis is another sign that what is at stake today is human life — and our own humanity. Unless volunteers and activists step into the rescue and refugee welfare operations, we

will see more people drowned.

What we are dealing with, therefore, is a set of pure ethnographic and explicitly anthropological, socially qualitative questions — such as the new forms of identity, the new forms of social bonds or social action that are shaped or have to be shaped under the current circumstances, in which both the state and the market are abandoning a number of realms where they have traditionally operated. This shift is above all of crucial importance in the case of Western Europe, where the relationship between citizens and infrastructures was — until recently — taken for granted.

The Empirical Focus in the case of Greece

The relationship between the state and infrastructural materiality has concerned me since 2004, when I started my PhD. My first research project was a study of infrastructures as supposedly purely state-run projects (under socialism in Albania). My second project concerned infrastructures as public/private partnership entities (in Athens), and my future research aims to study infrastructures as commons and as social project rather than a project of the state or the market.

My PhD thesis (2004-2008) was titled *An Anthropology of the Road* (2009, 2016). Its main idea was that if we want to understand the state ethnographically beyond studying its institutions per se, we need to focus on infrastructures as the typical site where state-craft becomes tangible to the citizenry. Even more explicitly, if we want to understand what infrastructures produce socially and vice versa, we need to study infrastructures that are constructed but not used for the purposes they were built for. So I chose to study transport infrastructures in Albania. Although it is relatively unknown, Albania was one of the first European countries with an advanced national highway system built for auto-mobility purposes, thanks to Italian international development projects in the 1930s. After WWII, the socialist regime continued the mass construction of highways. Although the country had plenty of highways, it had very little auto-mobility until the 1990s. The situation with electricity was similar, as grids were built but flows

were not guaranteed. Nevertheless, although these infrastructures were never really functional or used extensively for the reason they were built, they had a formidable effect on the shaping of the entire Albanian society.

Then my interest turned to questions around public urban spaces, collective action and spontaneity in Western Europe. I focused on Athens, Greece, analysing the socio-material contradictions emerging from public-private partnerships in the production of urban space under capitalism (Dalakoglou et al. 2014). The entire city was reconstructed anew for the sake of the 2004 Olympics mega-event, yet the process again failed to complete the production of the expected social subjects. Although they are physically and materially stable entities that for a while became the favoured arenas in the creation of a neoliberal ethos and subjectivity, these public urban spaces were transformed instantly by social action into places of protest and revolt. In December 2008, Athens witnessed one of the largest social uprisings the last few years in Europe, but it also became a city of protest in response to the austerity measures and mass impoverishment of the population since 2010. Similarly, the preparations for the mega-event of the 2012 Olympic Games in London were linked to the transformation of urban spaces and the riots of 2011. More recently, the same thing has happened in Brazil and in France.

Today, I propose that both these paradigms in the governance and development of infrastructures — in the case of Europe at least — are coming to an end. We are at a turning point in the history of European state governance; the paradigm is shifting with a formidable effect on all spheres of everyday life. Several leading scholars agree that the Greek debt crisis and its consequences constitute a radical version of the wider shift in the state's apparatuses across all Europe (Sassen 2015; Habermas 2012; Giddens 2013; Bauman 2014; Harvey 2013; Žižek 2015). In the case of Greece, where this new paradigm is already unravelling at a rapid pace, we are witnessing a new social response and innovative social action. On the one hand, this action contests the existing paradigm — which is imploding from within either way — and on the other it simultaneously produces the new paradigms of infrastructural organisation and

provision. However, this is an ongoing process that needs to be understood and studied from this early stage in order for us to be able to produce the new theoretical frameworks and analyses that will allow us to redefine both the notions of infrastructure, but also the notions of collective action.

In the case of Greece, there are already explicit shifts in the forms of governance and the capabilities that key infrastructures possess (Dalakoglou & Kallianos, forthcoming). Nevertheless, this crisis of governance — and especially its effects to infrastructures — is associated with the emergence of a new paradigm of collective action. There is a proliferation of mass grassroots practices and relationships that represent a reaction to the top-down contestation of the previous infrastructural paradigm, but at the same time they further challenge it from below. Such innovative social practices, which exhibit mass participation, create new realms of civil and social engagement that are directly relevant to key infrastructural functions (Dalakoglou & Kallianos forthcoming). For instance, apart from the old airport of Athens, where a transport infrastructure is mutated into common urban green land, one can mention the following examples:

- " In response to the decrease in the state's public health expenditures, 42 self-organised clinics and pharmacies have started operating since 2010. In July 2015, each of the sixteen newly founded clinics in Athens had an average 2,500 visitors per month.
- " Concerning the administration of the water and sewage system in the second largest city of the country, Thessaloniki, a campaign against privatization evolved into a demand for common control of water provision networks. Apart from direct action tactics, which among others included worker disobedience (e.g. the refusal to cut off water supply to households that could not afford the bills), WaterSOS saw the majority of the electorate of the city participating in a self-organised referendum (June 2014) that saw an explicit majority turn against the privatisation of the municipal water company; a fact that resulted in a halt to the government's plans.

- " In the area of public broadcasting, the government shut down the state's television channels and radio station in 2012 in order to reopen a more financially viable company. However, broadcasting facilities all around the country were occupied and have been functioning under the employees' self-management, with some of them operating under self-management right until the re-instatement of the previous public company under the Syriza government in 2015.
- " As far as urban waste management is concerned, the first major political clash after the signing of the loan agreement between the Greek government and the 'Troika' (IMF, EU and ECB) concerned the government's decision about the administration of the capital's waste products. This is an ongoing battle that has been raging on multiple fronts, and it is one where communities are claiming full participation in the decision-making processes or where the cooperative and social economy sector seems to come up with successful solutions.
- " The administration of the highway system is another contested area, as its privatization and the deceleration of private and public investment saw over 150,000 drivers refusing to pay toll in 2010, thus forcing state authorities to implement special legislative measures.
- " Beyond the social movement domain but with equally important social potentialities lies the decentralised private micro-production of solar energy that skyrocketed just before the crisis, with small units on rooftops and in open fields. Many thousands of Greek citizens have interests in this market, and with recent emergency changes in the legal framework that governs this energy micro-production, the attempts of producers to organise themselves in associations have drawn on some radical discourses challenging the prevalent model in this market.

Ethnographic studies of the Greek case allow us to create empirically and theoretically sound explanatory models of the societal challenges emerging from

the shift of established paradigms in public and infrastructural provision. Moreover, the Greek case presents a field of study that includes in its analytical axes the innovative social relationships, practices, discourses and principles of grassroots engagement within a context of the newly emerging infrastructural focus of collective action. Moreover, it allows us to understand the implications of the ongoing mutation of infrastructures and their functions into novel sites of social engagement with the initiative and mass participation of common people. It allows us to study the ongoing social transformation in order to contribute to the theoretical debates around this paradigm shift and become a leading reference in social scientific research on the related phenomena and the related policies. Eventually this will lead us to further theorise infrastructures, state and civil society in contemporary Europe. Last but not least, the Greek case is ideal for collaboration, interconnection and the exchange of knowledge, skills and tools with communities of practitioners in society and academia.

Anthropology, infrastructures and social innovation

Initially, anthropology touched upon infrastructures and their theoretical potentialities for the anthropological project in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Harris 1969; Godelier 1979; Humphrey 2006). Although the anthropological approach to infrastructures has always been distinct, these first infrastructural approaches still drew upon the materialist epistemology. As a result of this genealogy, infrastructures were commonly considered to be much more connected to the material, economic and political spheres, rather than to the social one. This 'anti-social' understanding is reflected in ideas about infrastructures as stable technological systems for the experienced normality in everyday life that is so prevalent in the European paradigm. However, what anthropology has been showing us for decades now is that such ideas are only relevant in the developed world, or among the privileged global classes (Edwards, 2003: 188, Larkin, 2013). In places where people are experiencing disruptions in other infrastructural networks, infrastructures are much more 'visible' and are

perceived as much less neutral and unsocial technological elements (Chu 2014; Dalakoglou and Kallianos 2014; Dalakoglou 2009). This point has been made on numerous occasions, especially in reference to the Global South (McFarlane in Graham, 2010:19).

At the other end, more recent work suggests that lack of reliability is always embedded in infrastructures (Soppelsa 2009; Dalakoglou 2009), although it becomes more apparent during times of crisis. The fragility that characterizes infrastructures is also reflected when, for example, one studies ethnographically the people behind the production of infrastructures, such as engineers, as they almost always take the unreliability of infrastructures as a given element of the process (Harvey and Knox 2011). Indeed, one could argue that such practices could potentially simply be 'black-boxing' by experts and specialists in an antagonistic relationship between technology practitioners and politicians on the one side, and common people on the other (Star and Bowker 2006). However, these roles of expertise might be imaginary, as it is not a rare phenomenon for the experts to be absent from the actual production and daily function of infrastructure systems, which instead function thanks to the work of mundane low-rank, skilled or unskilled agents (Dalakoglou 2009).

All the above echoes a relatively banal but relevant statement: infrastructures are predominantly *social* elements that tend to embody "congealed social interests" (Graham 2010:13; Graham & Marvin 2001:11). So my suggestion is that, irrespective of whether infrastructures are generally unstable or if this is something that is limited to the developing world, during the current crisis diverse stakeholders seem to agree that we are facing an unprecedented transition in recent history regarding the ways in which infrastructures function within the global core of the Western world. However, this situation opens up a unique window to a major paradigm shift where soft and hard infrastructures do not produce socio-cultural superstructures, but socio-cultural superstructure produces infrastructures. Typical social practices such as sharing, peer-to-peer production, ideas of the commons and so on, become the force behind the organisation and function of infrastructures.

To take this point even further, the question that the anthropology of infrastructures is invited to answer is how human relationships acquire infrastructural properties and vice versa. There have previously been discussions about “people as infrastructure” (Simone 2004), which have been used in reference to the capacity of infrastructures to facilitate processes that lead to wider areas of economic and cultural operation, developed from below by communities that possess limited means. Now is the appropriate moment for these debates not only to expand in order to cover the Western European context — given the continuously increased number of communities with limited means — but most importantly to include the parameter of the qualitative and ontological difference between the previous paradigm of infrastructural forms and the new ones that are emerging. In addition to that, the time is ripe for turning the Marxist infrastructural analysis on its head, exhibiting the ways that such a process leads to novel and innovative, fully operating socio-material infrastructural entities that are initiated by the superstructure.

Thus, the new infrastructural paradigm brings us to an anthropo-centric and anthropological form of infrastructure formations where human beings and social groups, in their everyday practice and social relationships, re-determine the infrastructures and the ways they were functioning so far.

Conclusion

Such an empirical focus is to be embedded within the so-called ‘infrastructural turn’ within the social sciences. Especially as far as socio-cultural anthropology is concerned, if a PhD titled *An Anthropology of the Road* in 2009 had to make a case and convince the reader that infrastructures are an anthropological theme of study per se, seven years later the study of infrastructures has acquired such a dynamic that it is emerging as a genre of its own (see Larkin 2013 for an overview but also Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Harvey and Knox 2015; Dalakoglou 2016). Meanwhile, some authors talk about an ‘infrastructural moment’ in the human sciences (Fortum & Fortum 2015).

This increased focus on infrastructures cannot be disassociated from the

outbreak of the ongoing economic crisis, as this implies the aforementioned paradigm shift concerning the forms of state governance, which include infrastructural functions and materialities. Beyond that, for the first time in recent Western history, we are also witnessing the pragmatic and theoretical potential of infrastructures not only to be run by the people themselves, but to become a new type of socio-centric entities.

In conclusion, the relationship between infrastructure and anthropology opens new opportunities for theoretical and practical innovations, as infrastructures — instead of being merely an economic or technological feature — are perceived anew via ethnography as embedded in active social relationships. This becomes apparent especially in times of deep crisis and rapid social restructuring, as the Greek case suggests.

This opens up a new definition of infrastructures on two accounts: first, as realms of social and political contestation with a focus on hard infrastructures within the context of crisis, economic meltdown and political implosion; and second, as sites of social innovation with the potentiality of articulating new and alternative governance and socio-economic networks focusing on grassroots structures and self-organised initiatives.

In this framework, anthropology emerges as the ideal discipline to study how collective practices inform and are embedded in the infrastructural bases they develop. Through concepts of a networked society (and economic structures), commoning, decentralisation and direct democratic grassroots participation, anthropology can answer how these processes lead to the translation of such emerging social practices into novel, more permanent and social-centred infrastructural formations.

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